

The Face of Civilization?



by Theodore Dalrymple

When you are threatened by a serious and dangerous enemy, is the enemy of your enemy your friend? This is the question that came to my mind when I first learned about a Russian rap singer called *Face*. Face has, so to speak, defaced himself by having tattoos inscribed on his face. His language is not of the most select. His response to his critics, if reports are to be believed and the translation is accurate, commends them to kneel and perform a lewd act. Without expletives, his work would be considerably shorter than it is.

The content of his lyrics, the people he models himself on, and his personal manner all strike me as indicative of someone who has decisively taken his stand against civilization and made Satan's departing cry from Paradise his own:

*So farewell hope, and with hope, farewell fear,
Farewell remorse: all good to me is lost;
Evil, be thou my good...*

Ugliness is now the beauty of such as Face. Farewell beauty, and with beauty farewell taste, farewell judgment.

Face, however, is undoubtedly brave; it is no small thing to have [criticised Vladimir Putin as strongly as he has done](#). His vocal opposition to the war in Ukraine called for a courage that I, with my desire for a quiet life, cannot be sure that I would ever have displayed, and Face has uncompromisingly characterised Putin's regime as inherently brutal and bellicose, not a safe thing to do in present circumstances. He has now gone into exile: though he has not revealed where because of the long arm of Putin's poisoners.

Putin's attitude to the genre of rap music has not been one of straightforward condemnation on aesthetic or civilizational grounds: he has objected to it only when the lyrics displeased him, and he has even tried, without much success, to co-opt it to his own purposes. Rap, certainly when inspired by figures such as Face, is by its nature oppositional, and Putin is not very tolerant of opposition. But rap music is very popular among the Russian youth, which is what makes it potentially dangerous for Putin and why it is an object of suppression. Face is far from the only Russian rap singer to have gone into exile for safety's sake.

The Putin regime is so dangerous for the peace of the world that one might think that even the slightest hesitancy about Russian opposition to it, whatever form it takes, must be trivial and beside the point. What is a little adolescent savagery when it is set against state savagery on an enormous scale, especially when the political hearts of the adolescent savages are in the right place?

In this connection, I cannot help but recall another figure of opposition to Russian tyranny, Ivan Turgenev. Whether the tyranny that he faced, that of Tsar Nicholas I, was milder than that of Vladimir Putin, depends on the criteria used to measure it, I suppose. Putin is certainly a more brutal figure

than Nicholas, being himself the proud successor of a regime incomparably worse than that of Nicholas. On the other hand, Nicholas presided over a regime in which the great majority of the population were property and often treated by their owners with horrific cruelty.

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Turgenev detested serfdom with all his being. He had seen it close up, his mother having been a serf-owner of vicious propensities. Turgenev did not tattoo his face, however, or adopt an insolent posture to the world, or employ vulgar language. He did not admire the worst that western culture has to offer, but the best. He wrote a masterpiece about peasant life, *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*, that has been read ever since, and is widely credited with having accelerated the emancipation of the serfs. No more eloquent a protest against a social system has ever been written.

Of course, Turgenev wrote for a tiny, educated elite, of which he was a prominent member, at a time when students in Russia counted no more than a few thousand. By contrast, Face's songs (if you can call them songs) have been listened to by millions of people, scores of millions of times, so far, at any rate, without obvious political effect.

The historical, social, and economic conditions are so different between the two epochs—those of Turgenev and Face—that it is probably absurd to compare the two modes of protest, and yet I cannot help myself. Neither Turgenev nor Face may be representative of the protest of their own times; still, the fact remains that the refinement of Turgenev would not be possible now, nor would the deliberate and self-conscious ugliness of Face have been possible, or even thinkable, in Turgenev's time. Something has changed in human

sensibility, and not only in Russia.

There is a kind of ugliness that seems to have entered our soul. Turgenev was exquisitely sensitive to beauty of all kinds; his protest was therefore against ugliness of all kinds. Being what we would now call an old-fashioned liberal, as well as an aesthete, he wanted to make life more beautiful, without illusions about the difficulties and even the dangers of doing so.

By contrast, our attitude to ugliness is pragmatic rather than idealistic: if you can't beat it, join it, or even outdo it. This comes almost as a relief, because the creation of beauty is difficult and strenuous whereas the creation of ugliness is easy and requires brazenness rather than discipline and self-control.

Needless to say, I am not arguing for censorship or political repression of the kind that has driven Face from his homeland. If freedom means toleration of the ugliness of Face, I am still for it. But this does not prevent me from wishing that our civilisation (of which Face is a derivative phenomenon) were somewhat more refined in its sensibility and more capable of attracting a Turgenev than a Face.

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